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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2344 (2017), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my report of 3 March 2017 (A/71/826-S/2017/189). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events relating to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. The National Unity Government made some progress on priority reforms, as well as on high-level appointments. Afghan authorities advanced electoral preparations with the approval of a polling centre assessments package. The reporting period was otherwise dominated by the return to Afghanistan of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) faction. Hekmatyar's return took place at a time of flux in Afghan politics, which is partly driven by increased jockeying among political figures ahead of the 2019 presidential elections. The First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, left the country in mid-May reportedly for medical treatment in Turkey, his Junbish-e Milli party became increasingly vocal in its opposition to the Government, and personalities within the Jamiat-e-Islami party started positioning themselves. Meanwhile, there was no discernible progress on peace talks between the Government and the Taliban. An increase in multilateral engagement at the regional level was, however, observed. Afghanistan and Pakistan made efforts to improve relations despite occasional border clashes. The security situation remained very volatile, with an

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increase in security incidents in the first five months of the year over the same period in 2016. On 31 May, Kabul witnessed a suicide attack, which killed at least 65 people and injured more than 300, further straining the already fragile political situation and leading to several days of public demonstrations, some of which became violent. High levels of violence against civilians and significant internal displacement continued to be recorded. Economic growth, while slightly improved, remained low throughout the reporting period.

A. Political developments

4. The President, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, made progress on high-level appointments, which had previously been a source of tension within the National Unity Government. A security appointments board was established in March, headed by a new Minister of State for Reform in the Security Sector, to address the need for merit-based promotions in the security sector. On 11 March, the Chair of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission was appointed, a position that had been vacant since December 2015. The Government made further senior-level appointments and nominated four cabinet members: the Minister of Mines and Petroleum, the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, the State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and the State Minister of Tourism Affairs. However, the future of six other ministers who were the subject of parliamentary no-confidence votes in November 2016 remained uncertain, and some parliamentarians continued to call upon the Government to introduce new candidates for those ministries.

5. On 27 March, the lower house of the National Assembly interpellated the Minister of Defence, the Minister of the Interior and the Director of the National Directorate of Security following a deadly attack on a military hospital in Kabul earlier that month. All survived no-confidence votes. However, the Minister of Defence and the Chief of Army Staff subsequently resigned from their positions following an attack on an Afghan army base in Balkh Province on 21 April, which resulted in mass casualties and a significant public backlash against the country's security leadership. Separately, the lower house of the National Assembly suspended the salaries of nine members as a result of their frequent absences.

6. The approaching presidential election of 2019 began to affect various political alliances. Divisions within the Jamiat-e-Islami political party were increasingly apparent. The Governor of Balkh Province, Atta Mohammad Noor, publicly criticized Chief Executive Abdullah on 13 March for failing to obtain sufficient positions for Jamiat members within the Government and continued to engage with President Ghani to achieve that goal. Separately, on 16 April, President Ghani dismissed the Jamiat Deputy Chairperson, Ahmed Zia Massoud, from his Cabinet-level position as Special Envoy for Reforms and Good Governance. Massoud had been an early supporter of Ghani's campaign in 2014, although after being dismissed he publicly expressed his regret for having done so. Meanwhile, the Jamiat-e-Islami party expanded its leadership council, and the party announced on 23 May its intention to nominate a presidential candidate for the elections in 2019.

7. First Vice-President Dostum remained under investigation for the alleged abduction and sexual assault of a political rival in November 2016. He was confined to his home in Kabul until 19 May, when he travelled to Turkey, reportedly for medical treatment. On 11 March, hundreds of supporters from Dostum's Junbish-e Milli party gathered at his house and named his son, Batur Dostum, acting head of the party. On 26 April, about 2,000 Junbish supporters rallied in Shibirghan city, Jowzjan Province, and on 5 May in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province, to protest

against the Government's perceived exclusion of the First Vice-President and alleged bias against non-Pashtun ethnicities.

8. The leader of Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, appeared in public in Afghanistan for the first time in more than 20 years on 29 April in Laghman Province. Hekmatyar's return was part of a peace agreement concluded between the Government and Hizb-i Islami in September 2016. On 1 May, President Ghani signed a decree authorizing the release of the first batch of prisoners affiliated with Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), and the following day the release of 55 prisoners was announced. On 4 May, Hekmatyar arrived in Kabul in an armed convoy and gave a speech at the Presidential Palace to a large audience of State officials and other political leaders. President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah and the former President, Hamid Karzai, were in attendance, but some prominent members of the rival Jamiat-e-Islami party were notably absent. President Ghani welcomed Hekmatyar's return as an important step towards peace and reconciliation. However, human rights defenders and civil society groups expressed concern that Hekmatyar's return could lead to a reversal of the gains in human, political and civil rights made since the collapse of the Taliban regime. Hekmatyar began discussions with Hizb-i Islami (Arghandiwal), a political party faction whose members already participate in the administration. Rival political actors expressed concern that if the Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) and (Arghandiwal) united, it could become the country's largest political party.

9. On 1 April, the Government outlined its vision for peace in a document released to international donors. The document highlighted the need for an inclusive peace process to bring an end to the conflict and to consolidate credible institutions to channel political differences. It also proposed structural changes and a curtailed mandate to the High Peace Council. Subsequently, the Government circulated a draft peace and reconciliation strategic plan to international donors on 18 May. Also on 1 April, the President appointed a new Head of the secretariat for the High Peace Council, which had been vacant since 19 November 2016. On 6 June, President Ghani announced the appointment of the former Vice-President, Karim Khalili, as the new Chair of the High Peace Council. There was, however, no discernible progress on peace talks between the Government and the Taliban.

10. Within the context of a broader Afghan-led process, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) supported nine ongoing local peace initiatives in nine different provinces during the reporting period. Through those initiatives, UNAMA provided technical and logistical support to assist Afghan entities in the sustainable and non-violent resolution of conflicts and grievances. Conflicts addressed include land disputes, the security of highways, and religious radicalization. On 6 April, UNAMA supported a conference on women's role in the peace process in Herat Province, which 100 participants from 13 districts attended. Participants called for concrete action to implement the country's national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).

11. The Government made some progress on electoral preparations during the reporting period. In April, the Independent Election Commission approved a polling centre assessment package, which includes an operational plan, procedures and budget. The assessment fulfils one of the recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission. On 1 March, the President appointed a new Chief Electoral Officer to head the Independent Election Commission secretariat, which had been vacant since June 2014. Meanwhile, the Electoral Complaints Commission started to draft a gender policy aimed at, among others, improving the representation of women in the Commission and began its recruitment process. While the Government reiterated its commitment to holding elections during the current

Afghan year, which ends in March 2018, key decisions, including on the constituencies, budget, timeline and funding modalities, have not been made.

12. The Government and the Independent Election Commission continued to consider options for the introduction of new technology for future elections. On 11 March, the Independent Election Commission presented a technical study to the Government and donors, which determined that new technology should be used for the next elections, and in April, the Independent Election Commission commissioned a feasibility study to assess the possibility of introducing new technology. The Government and the Independent Election Commission continued to explore modalities to introduce the use of new technology.

13. In March, the Government reached a decision on an electronic national identification card, after a long impasse. The distribution of such identification cards is one of the commitments in the 2014 political agreement on the establishment of the National Unity Government. On 20 March, the Government adopted an action plan and decided to commence distribution of the cards. On 22 April, President Ghani issued a legislative decree, subsequently approved by the lower house of the National Assembly on 8 May, amending the Population Registration Law to provide that ethnicity and nationality would be reflected on the cards. On 13 May, a Presidential decree was issued, which, among others, required commencement of a pilot phase of the plan within 90 days.

B. Security

14. The security situation in Afghanistan remained intensely volatile. UNAMA recorded 5,687 security-related incidents in Afghanistan between January and the end of March 2017, the highest total ever recorded for that period since 2001. Between 1 March and 31 May, the United Nations recorded 6,252 security-related incidents, which represents a 2 per cent increase against the same period in 2016. In line with established trends, armed clashes accounted for the majority (64 per cent) of security incidents, followed by improvised explosive devices (16 per cent). Targeted killings and abductions decreased by 4 per cent compared with the same period in 2016. The eastern and southern regions were the most volatile, with a 22 per cent increase in incidents in the eastern region compared with the same period in 2016. The Taliban focused their attacks on Badakhshan, Baghlan, Farah, Faryab, Helmand, Kunar, Kunduz, Laghman, Sari Pul, Zabul and Uruzgan Provinces. Taliban attacks against the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces around Lashkar Gah and surrounding districts in Helmand Province were repelled after the Afghan National Army Special Forces received support through international military-conducted air strikes. The number of air strikes was significantly higher (112 per cent) compared with the same period in 2016.

15. On 28 April, the Taliban announced the launch of their annual spring offensive, "Operation Mansouri". Their statement in 2017 described a two-track approach involving military and political objectives, including advice to minimize civilian casualties and to focus on targeting foreign forces in Afghanistan and their Afghan partners. However, there has not been any significant improvement in civilian casualty statistics. On the day of the announcement, the Taliban captured the strategically important Zaybak district in Badakhshan Province, which borders Pakistan. It was retaken several weeks later by Afghan security forces. During the reporting period, the Taliban also temporarily captured Sangin district in Helmand Province, Qal'ah-i Zal district in Kunduz Province and Khwajah Baha' al-Din district in Takhar Province.

16. On 8 March, a complex attack was carried out against the largest military hospital in Afghanistan, located in Kabul. The group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) claimed responsibility for the attack, in which 50 persons were reportedly killed, of whom approximately half were military personnel (enjoying protected or hors de combat status), and 88 others were wounded, including at least 22 civilians. On 21 April, the Taliban carried out a complex attack against the headquarters of the Afghan National Army 209 Corps in Mazar-e Sharif, in Balkh Province, which resulted in at least 140 security forces killed and 60 others injured.

17. ISIL-KP maintained a presence in southern Nangarhar Province despite increased military operations carried out by the United States of America and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. International military forces continued operations, including the use of a "massive ordnance air blast" that killed a reportedly high number of ISIL-KP members in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, on 13 April. In early May, government and United States military officials confirmed that the ISIL-KP leader, Abdul Hasib, had been killed in a United States Special Forces raid conducted on 27 April. ISIL-KP continued its attacks against the civilian population and military and foreign military targets, and unverified local sources claimed that ISIL-KP reinforcements and recruitment continued. The group took responsibility for a complex attack on the National Radio Television of Afghanistan station in Jalalabad on 17 May.

18. On 31 May, a suicide attacker detonated a truck-borne explosive device in the city centre of Kabul. The explosion killed at least 80 people and injured 464, most of whom were civilians. The bomb, one of the largest detonated in Kabul, caused considerable damage to infrastructure in the surrounding area, including a number of diplomatic facilities, forcing some embassies to evacuate personnel. The attack led to several days of protests, in which some protesters were killed, allegedly by security forces, including the son of a Member of Parliament. Suicide bombers at the funeral ceremony for the deceased killed 6 civilians and injured 87, according to preliminary information, in an escalating cycle of violence.

19. By late April, the official number of Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police personnel was at 90.4 per cent and 95.1 per cent of projected levels, respectively, up from 86 per cent and 94 per cent in February, respectively.

20. A total of 11 recorded incidents had an impact on the United Nations, including 1 case of intimidation, 1 incident relating to an improvised explosive device and 5 criminal-related incidents; there were no armed clashes or abductions.

C. Regional cooperation

21. During the reporting period, efforts were made by the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to improve relations, following a period of heightened tensions from late 2016 to early 2017, as noted in my previous report. On 21 March, Pakistan reopened the two official crossing points into Afghanistan, in Torkham and Spin Boldak, which had been closed on 17 February, although the border was closed intermittently throughout the reporting period. On 15 and 16 March, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland hosted high-level bilateral talks attended by the National Security Adviser to the President of Afghanistan, Hanif Atmar, and the Adviser to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, which were aimed at building confidence and resulted in the establishment of a cross-border mechanism between the two countries. Tensions remained, however, related partly to ongoing efforts by Pakistan to fence part of the border with Afghanistan, as well as incidents of cross-border shelling. In a positive

development, a high-level Pakistani parliamentary delegation led by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan arrived in Kabul for meetings with Afghan counterparts from 29 April to 1 May. The delegation also met President Ghani and other officials. Shortly afterwards, the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan visited Kabul and met President Ghani and other high-level government officials. Such efforts to improve bilateral relations were subsequently disrupted on 5 May, when border guards from both countries clashed after Pakistani authorities began conducting a census in two villages in a disputed area near the Spin Boldak-Chaman crossing point. Following a negotiated ceasefire, the fighting has stopped, and efforts continue at the political level to resolve the dispute.

22. A number of multilateral and bilateral initiatives continued. On 16 March, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Tajikistan met in Dushanbe to discuss the military-political situation in Afghanistan and the prospect of enhanced Russian-Tajik cooperation. The Heart of Asia senior officials meeting was held on 17 March in Baku, at which participants reaffirmed their commitments to enhancing economic and security cooperation through the Heart of Asia-Istanbul process. Uzbekistan also continued its increased engagement in Afghanistan, including by appointing a Special Representative for Afghanistan on 25 May. During a visit to the Russian Federation on 4 and 5 April, the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated that peace in Afghanistan must be reached through negotiations. In April, Kazakhstan held the second round of political consultations with Afghanistan in Astana. On 14 April, the Russian Federation hosted a conference on Afghanistan in Moscow, with representatives of China, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in attendance. Other invitees included Turkmenistan and the United States. Participants emphasized the need for direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Following the conference, on 15 April a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan stated its intention to host the next talks in Kabul, and the Government began preparations for a conference with wider participation, which was to be held on 6 June. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization ministerial meeting was held on 21 April in Astana, during which participants reiterated the Organization's commitment to initiating a political dialogue between parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.

III. Human rights

23. On 27 April, UNAMA released its conflict-related civilian casualty data for the first quarter of 2017. Between 1 January and 31 March, UNAMA documented 2,181 civilian casualties (715 dead and 1,466 injured), representing a 4 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2016, which comprised a 2 per cent decrease in civilian deaths and a 5 per cent decrease in injuries. UNAMA attributed 62 per cent of civilian casualties to anti-government elements, 21 per cent to pro-government forces and 9 per cent to ground fighting where the perpetrator could not be identified. The majority of the remaining 8 per cent were attributed to the detonation of unattributed unexploded ordnance. Ground engagements caused most civilian casualties (35 per cent), followed by improvised explosive devices (19 per cent) and suicide and complex attacks (17 per cent). Of particular concern were the 24 per cent increase in women casualties (88 dead and 185 injured) and 17 per cent increase in child deaths (210 dead, in addition to 525 injured). Women and child casualties increased mainly from the impact of aerial operations, improvised explosive devices and suicide and complex attacks.

24. As a concrete measure to mitigate civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war, UNAMA welcomed the Government's commitment to ratifying Protocol V to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects and urged all parties to commence marking, clearing, removing and destroying explosive remnants of war in areas under their territorial control. UNAMA continued to conduct advocacy meetings with parties to the conflict, including Afghan national security forces, anti-government elements and international military forces, to promote respect for international humanitarian law and take concrete measures to protect civilians from harm.

25. Children continued to suffer disproportionally from the violence. Between 1 January and 31 March, UNAMA verified 384 incidents resulting in 735 child casualties (210 dead and 525 injured), representing a 3 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2016. Children comprised 34 per cent of overall civilian casualties. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, accounting for 42 per cent of all child casualties (312 child casualties), followed by incidents related to explosive remnants of war (164 child casualties; 22 per cent) and improvised explosive devices (114 child casualties; 15 per cent) in the first quarter of 2017. A total of 81 per cent of the victims from the unexploded ordnance were children.

26. With respect to the recruitment and use of children by the parties to the conflict, UNAMA verified the recruitment of 13 boys, including 9 by the Taliban, 2 by the Afghan National Police, 1 by the Afghan National Border Police and 1 by the Afghan Local Police. UNAMA verified three incidents of abduction by anti-government elements involving five boys and two incidents of sexual violence against two boys. As at 10 April, 135 children were detained on national security-related charges, including for association with anti-government armed groups, and held in poor conditions in the adult maximum-security detention facility in Parwan Province. Regarding the protection of health and educational facilities and workers, between 1 January and 31 March, 14 incidents affecting education were verified, the same as in the corresponding period for 2016. UNAMA also documented 17 schools used for military purposes. UNAMA notes a reduction in the military use of clinics, recording 1 incident during the reporting period compared with 31 in the same period in 2016. The country task force on monitoring and reporting documented seven incidents of denial of humanitarian access, five attributed to the Taliban and two to undetermined armed groups.

27. On 24 April, UNAMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a joint public report on the implementation of the country's national plan on the elimination of torture, covering the period between January 2015 and December 2016. Of the 469 detainees interviewed, 39 per cent gave credible accounts of having experienced torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment during arrest and interrogation in numerous detention facilities run by the National Directorate of Security and the Afghan National Police. The report also documented a pervasive lack of accountability for such practices. Prior to the report's release, the Government withdrew its reservation to the Convention against Torture, and the Cabinet approved in principle the signature of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. Following this, the President ordered the setting up of a national preventive mechanism. On 12 May, the Committee against Torture, in its concluding observations on the second periodic report of Afghanistan, expressed deep concern at the allegations of widespread use of torture and ill-treatment and a culture of impunity. The Committee called upon Afghanistan to make sure that all

allegations were investigated promptly, thoroughly and impartially and that alleged perpetrators were prosecuted.

28. Violence against women remained prevalent. The annual report of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, covering the period from March 2016 to March 2017 and released on 8 March, noted an increase of 8.6 per cent in the number of cases of violence against women recorded by its offices across the country. According to the Special Prosecutor on Elimination of Violence against Women, 2,442 cases were registered with prosecution offices across the country, with 149 cases adjudicated. A total of 22 per cent of registered cases were either withdrawn or not followed up by complainants. Commissions on the elimination of harassment against women have been established in 11 provinces. The draft law on the elimination of harassment against women and children was not endorsed by the President, following recommendations by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and civil society organizations to review it.

29. On 2 March, the revised Penal Code was passed by legislative decree after a four-year transparent and inclusive process. The President endorsed it on 4 March, and it is being printed for the Official Gazette. The decree delays the application of the Code for nine months after publication, to allow the security and justice sectors to be trained on and the public to be informed of the revised Code combining crimes in more than 50 special laws enacted since the 1976 Penal Code. The Code incorporates all of the country's substantive treaty obligations, including all mandatory crimes under the United Nations Convention against Corruption, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, and criminal liability against civilian superiors or military commanders who fail to prevent or punish subordinates who commit these crimes under the Rome Statute and the prohibition of the practice of land-grabbing. It also expands the 1976 definition of the crime of torture to comply with the Convention. The Code provides a progressive definition of rape, being gender-neutral, requiring modern definitions of consent and protecting privacy, dignity and bodily integrity. It furthermore reduces the number of crimes subject to the death penalty by 74 per cent.

30. The Government presented an updated version of the budget ($52 million) proposed for implementing Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. A small working group with representation from both the Government and the international community was formed in March to review the activities and budget with relevant line ministries, with a view to developing a funding mechanism for the plan. On 18 April, the Government launched its national action plan to eliminate early and child marriages for the period 2017-2021.

31. Media workers and civil society actors continued to face intimidation and abuse from anti-government elements. Lack of cooperation from local authorities, including their occasional interference in the work of civil society actors, was also registered during the reporting period. UNAMA recorded four cases of intimidation and killing of civil society actors in Baghlan, Nangarhar and Kabul Provinces. In April, UNAMA supported the relocation to Kabul of one human rights defender under threat. On 7 May, two unknown gunmen on a motorcycle shot and killed a prominent journalist, politician and civil society activist in Pul-e-Khumri city. In Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province, five media workers, employees of National Radio Television of Afghanistan, were killed in the above-mentioned 17 May attack claimed by ISIL-KP.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and coordination of development assistance

32. The Government continued to take steps to address the country's significant economic challenges. The International Monetary Fund and Afghan authorities concluded a first review of the country's Extended Credit Facility on 4 March. The review estimated 2016 growth at 2 per cent, somewhat higher than earlier estimates. An increase to 3 per cent was projected for 2017, driven by favourable agricultural output. Fund staff commended authorities for prudent macroeconomic management and strong progress on structural reforms in challenging circumstances. On 4 March, the country's central bank announced that the Government had substantially addressed technical aspects of an action plan to improve its framework for combating money-laundering and terrorist financing. Representatives of the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force conducted an on-site visit in Kabul on 11 and 12 April to monitor progress in Afghanistan, which the Task Force considers a high-risk jurisdiction. Recommendations from the visit will inform a future decision as to whether Afghanistan will remain subject to enhanced monitoring.

33. Follow-up to the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, held in October 2016, remained a priority for the Government and donors. The Government continued its efforts to detail its development priorities in 10 National Priority Programmes for 10 sectors, as envisioned in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework. On 8 March, the Government launched the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme. On 4 April, the Ministries of Economy and Finance outlined to donors plans to incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals into the National Priority Programmes.

34. The Government's budget execution report for the first three and a half months of the Afghan financial year (21 December 2016-8 April 2017) showed no improvement in the percentage of budget spent compared with the same period the previous year (14 per cent in both years). In absolute terms, budget expenditures were lower by $37.3 million. The total allotment or spending authority was, at $2.5 billion, lower by about $731 million. Sectors that saw the greatest reductions were infrastructure and natural resources, social protection, security, and economic governance; expenditures for agriculture, rural rehabilitation and development, education, and health were marginally higher than in the previous year. To improve the execution of the national budget, the Government allotted $1 million to each province to be spent in four sectors (health, education, rural rehabilitation and development, and agriculture). That allocation serves as a pilot for the implementation of the Provincial Budgeting Policy, which was launched on 19 April. Ultimately, the Government would like 40 per cent of its budget to be spent by subnational authorities.

35. On 25 April, UNAMA published its first anti-corruption report, which acknowledges progress made in the Government's anti-corruption efforts, such as the establishment of the High Council on Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption and the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, the appointment of a high-level committee to work on a national anti-corruption strategy, the completion of anti-corruption plans by the five largest revenue-generating ministries, progress in improving controls over public financial management, and increased transparency in national procurement processes. The report recommended more effective implementation of key reforms, such as merit-based public sector recruitment, revenue collection and budget execution, and the implementation of stronger oversight and coordination. Since its first trial in November 2016, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre has adjudicated 14 primary court cases, finding 40 accused guilty, and affirmed 10 cases

on appeal, including those involving high-level officials on charges of bribery, embezzlement and abuse of official authority to obstruct justice. The Centre's prosecutors accepted for investigation 96 cases during the reporting period, many of which they are formally investigating at present.

36. After Afghanistan joined the global Open Government Partnership in December 2016, the Government facilitated three awareness forums in coordination with major civil society networks to promote the role and representation of civil society in six Open Government Partnership working groups, namely on fiscal system openness, legislative openness, access to information, anti-corruption, data openness and natural resources.

37. Further efforts were made to increase the number of women in the Afghan National Police. On 24 April, 245 female police completed a two-month training course and were posted according to their educational levels. The total number of female police officers within the police force remained at approximately 2 per cent. The civilianization of the police also continued. Out of 191 positions earmarked for civilians in the Afghan National Police, 57 positions were filled during the reporting period, resulting in 117 filled to date. In April, the Ministry of Higher Education granted the National Police Academy the status of a university, allowing its cadets to obtain a recognized degree.

V. Humanitarian assistance

38. The ongoing conflict continued to result in significant displacement and protection risks. Between January and mid-May, more than 100,000 individuals were newly internally displaced across the country, with 29 of 34 provinces having recorded some level of displacement. The north, south, east and west of the country were similarly affected, with the provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Nangahar and Faryab all reporting more than 6,000 people displaced. Humanitarian assistance provided to affected populations by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations included emergency food, shelter and non-food items, cash, health services and supplies. The Government's technical working group on land under the Afghanistan Independent Land Authority developed a new legal framework for the identification and provision of suitable land and housing to displaced persons. The framework includes criteria to ensure the suitability of all allocated land and to assess applicants' eligibility.

39. The repatriation programme of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees resumed on 3 April, after which 24,414 registered Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan, each receiving $200 per person to support their immediate humanitarian needs.

40. The deportation and spontaneous return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan continued, with 50,985 arrivals (50,254 spontaneous arrivals and 731 deportees) between 4 March and 20 May, accounting for 83 per cent of the total arrivals from Pakistan in 2017. Since 1 January, the total number of undocumented returnees arriving from Pakistan rose to 60,626, almost double the number that returned in the same period in 2016. Returns from Pakistan continued to be driven by a marked deterioration of protection space. During the reporting period, the International Organization for Migration documented 81,099 arrivals from the Islamic Republic of Iran (20,502 spontaneous arrivals and 60,597 deportees). It assisted 37,344 returnees (73 per cent) from Pakistan and 2,709 (4 per cent) returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran during that period. Between 1 March and 24 May, the International Organization for Migration also assisted 1,095 returnees from Europe (compared with 2,432 for the same period in 2016).

41. The temporary closure of the Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossing points delayed the delivery of essential humanitarian supplies, including medicines, education materials and food assistance, to thousands of beneficiaries. The closures particularly affected the delivery of specialized foods for children under 5, interrupting routine malnutrition treatment for 11,000 children. The continued influx of returning Afghans and their tendency to congregate in Jalalabad and Kabul cities also added to the pressure on existing resources and stretched the capacity of humanitarian partners. Some 20 per cent of the population across Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar Provinces are currently returnees (approximately 500,000 people). As part of long-term efforts to reintegrate returnees and manage internally displaced persons, on 19 March the United Nations, the Government and donors endorsed a comprehensive action plan developed under the auspices of the Policy Framework for Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons to focus on the protection of civilians in conflict-affected areas, the provision of immediate humanitarian assistance, documentation, access to basic services, land allocation and adequate housing

42. In the first three months of 2017, United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners reached 1.3 million people of the planned 5.7 million. However, constraints on humanitarian access continued to be recorded, with a total of 73 incidents affecting the United Nations and humanitarian partners registered between 1 March and 24 May. The incidents reported included the death of 1 aid worker and the abduction of 11 aid workers and injuries to 2 others. As many as 26 per cent of all incidents recorded were against health workers and health facilities. The number of internally displaced persons located in hard-to-reach areas has continued to grow, constituting 22 per cent (21,827) of the newly displaced in 2017. Addressing the needs of those displaced in highly insecure districts not fully under government control remains immensely challenging. The Taliban displayed some willingness to facilitate access for vaccination campaigns following an outbreak of polio outside Kunduz Province and to engage in dialogue over a response to conflict-displaced people in previously unreached districts of Baghlan Province.

43. As at 21 May, the total funding for humanitarian action in Afghanistan stood at $213 million, of which $115 million was for activities included in the Humanitarian Response Plan.

44. The Mine Action Service and mine action partners continued to provide risk education at encashment and transit centres to ensure that returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran were aware of the presence and danger of landmines, explosive remnants of war and abandoned pressure-plate improvised explosive devices. From 1 March to 30 April, 92,466 returnees received such education. In addition, mine action partners, coordinated by the Mine Action Service and the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination of Afghanistan, declared 18 communities mine-free, which enabled approximately 19,499 individuals across 8.9 km^2 to move freely within their community. However, it is estimated that 3,511 minefields, 309 battlefields and 52 contaminated firing ranges remain, affecting 1,500 communities, in addition to the continued threat from pressure-plate improvised explosive devices and explosive weaponry. The 2017 average monthly incident rate of 87 victims represents a decrease compared with a monthly average of 162 victims recorded in 2016; the vast majority (97.8 per cent) is due to explosive remnants of war and pressure-plate improvised explosive devices rather than landmines.

VI. Counter-narcotics

45. The Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, with technical support from the United Nations, completed the Afghanistan socioeconomic report on opium cultivation for 2016 on 19 May. It found that the estimated value of opiates produced in Afghanistan increased to $3.02 billion in 2016 from $1.56 billion in 2015. At 16 per cent of gross domestic product, the value of opiates was more than two thirds of that of the entire licit agricultural sector of the country. The increase between 2015 and 2016 was attributed to a 43 per cent rise in opium production together with escalating heroin prices.

46. Annual opium poppy eradication efforts began in March. By 23 May, Afghan authorities had eradicated 685 ha in Balkh, Badghis, Herat, Kunar, Kabul, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Nimroz Provinces (final eradication figures will be confirmed only upon analysis of satellite imagery). This represented a marked increase in eradication over the 2016 season, when, during the same period, Afghan authorities eradicated only 98 ha of poppy in Badakhshan, Kandahar, Laghman, Nimroz, Sar-e Pul and Takhar Provinces. The increase is attributable to greater emphasis on eradication by the President, intensified efforts by the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, and improved follow-up by the National Security Council, following poor results from governor-led eradication activities in 2016.

47. From 3 March to 24 May, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 745 counter-narcotics operations, which led to the seizure of 723 kg of heroin, 34,820 kg of morphine, 15,263 kg of opium, 16 kg of methamphetamine, 9,951 kg of hashish, 21,535 kg of solid precursor chemicals, 32,790 litres of liquid precursor chemicals and 29 K-tablets (synthetic drugs). In addition, 22 heroin processing laboratories were dismantled, and 124 vehicles, 116 weapons, 209 mobile telephones and five radios were seized. During those operations, 829 suspects were arrested and two members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were killed and two wounded.

48. The Sixth Steering Committee Meeting of the Regional Programme for Afghanistan and Neighbouring Countries was hosted by the Government of Kazakhstan in Astana on 6 April. Senior representatives from the drug control agencies and Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs from the eight Regional Programme countries, as well as donors, international partners and organizations, reviewed the achievements in 2016 and identified priorities for 2017. Participants noted the positive impact of strengthened regional cooperation and joint responses to countering illicit drugs and transnational organized crime.

VII. Mission support

49. The Mission's current vacancy rate is at 10 per cent, compared with the approved vacancy rate of 14 per cent for international staff, and 4 per cent compared with the approved vacancy rate of 6 per cent for national staff. The gender balance stands at 86 per cent male and 14 per cent female for staff in all categories. Despite special measures granted for the Mission to recruit and retain more national female staff, national female staff representation remains at 7 per cent.

50. Between 1 March 2017 and 30 April, UNAMA conducted 178 road and 22 air missions, as well as 508 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

51. On 14 June 2017, I visited Afghanistan to express my solidarity with the Government and people of Afghanistan following the severe terrorist attacks in Kabul on 31 May and 3 June 2017. I left the country deeply concerned about the deteriorating security situation, which has caused not only immense human suffering but also significant internal displacement, as I witnessed during a meeting with internally displaced men and women. Despite their dire living conditions, their courage and unwavering commitment to contributing to a prosperous Afghanistan should inspire us all to support them concertedly. Peace remains the foundation for the country's sustainable development.

52. In my meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, I stressed the importance of government unity. They expressed their deep concern at the proliferation of different terrorist groups in the Afghan territory and the need for a more concerted international effort to counter terrorism. The recent meeting between President Ghani and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, provides hope for an improvement in bilateral relations, an essential condition for more effective counter-terrorism action.

53. I am encouraged that the Government continued to progress its reform agenda. Efforts to address corruption and increase accountability among senior officials, including in the security apparatus, are particularly welcome. Of note in this regard is the work of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, as well as the Government's commitment to eliminating the practice of torture and ill-treatment of conflict-related detainees, to ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to withdrawing its reservations to that Convention. I welcome the Government's revision by legislative decree of the Penal Code.

54. The emerging focus on elections is encouraging; at the same time, it has the potential to create new divisions and exacerbate existing tensions within the political sphere. I welcome the continued commitment of the Government and electoral institutions to holding credible and transparent elections. Initiating the polling centre assessment package will be an important step towards electoral preparations in general and will fulfil one of the key recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission: the preparation of polling centre-based voter lists. It will be crucial to expeditiously make progress on the remaining issues for preparations to start in earnest.

55. While the rate of economic growth has improved somewhat, it has been outpaced by the population growth, including returns. The Government's development priorities are articulated in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, to which the international community generously pledged its support in Brussels in 2016. I encourage all stakeholders to make efforts to improve the delivery of the Framework. For the United Nations part, I remain committed to helping to realize the vision of delivering as one.

56. The security situation has deteriorated further. The Afghan security forces continued to face an intensifying insurgency. The unrelenting nature of the conflict has affected morale and is a matter that the Government believes must be addressed. The heavy toll of the fighting on civilians, particularly on women and children, reflects the need for all parties to the conflict to take urgent steps to halt the killing and maiming of civilians. I am particularly concerned about the attack in Kabul on 31 May and the subsequent escalation of violence, which further demonstrated the vulnerability of civilians in the conflict. I stress the need for accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law. The need to

move forward with the implementation of the national civilian casualty prevention and mitigation strategy is crucial in this regard. I note the commitment of the Government to formally ratifying Protocol V to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects and call upon the parties to the conflict to remove explosive remnants of war left behind from fighting in areas under their territorial control.

57. The high number of internal displacements remains of concern. In addition, the number of people returning to Afghanistan in 2017 is at higher levels than during the same period in 2016. Besides posing humanitarian challenges in the immediate future, the successful absorption and integration of a large number of returnees will require medium- and long-term development solutions, including access to land and basic services. I commend the Government for its engagement and commitment to determining measures towards addressing this issue. I note that there has been a slight improvement in humanitarian access for the conduct of the polio campaign and encourage all parties to increase access in the interest of the health and welfare of all Afghans.

58. Progress achieved in the implementation of the peace agreement between the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), including the return of its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to Afghanistan and the release of Hizb-i Islami prisoners, demonstrates the Government's willingness to establish peace. Peace must be attained through negotiations and not on the battlefield. For peace to be long-lasting, it must be inclusive, ensure accountability for past abuses and uphold the rights of victims.

59. Regrettably, there has been no discernible progress towards direct peace talks between the Government and the Taliban. A regional environment conducive for an Afghan-led peace process is essential. The Government's initiative to convene the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation conference on 6 June was conceived to that end. It is a testament to the Government's resolve to achieve peace that the conference went ahead despite the horrific levels of violence in the week leading up to it.

60. On regional relations, a series of recent security incidents in Kabul cast a shadow over efforts by the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to improve their relations. The renewed high-level contacts between senior military officials from both countries and the visit by a senior Pakistani parliamentary delegation to Kabul were positive steps towards enhancing confidence at various levels. I urge the two countries to continue this constructive engagement towards improving bilateral relations, which is a key to fostering peace in Afghanistan and beyond.

61. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan under very challenging conditions.